

## The Reconsideration of ELT in Japan - to Establish CLT in the Classroom -\*

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### 1. Introduction

Language education is a highly complicated business and largely reflects the countries' political, economical and social situations and norms. As various aspects of Japanese society change, the emphasis in foreign language teaching is shifting towards practical aspects. Teachers of English as well as schools have to do their best to come up to what society expects (Grauberg, 1997). Teachers need to help students to achieve the goal, a certain level of proficiency, in other words, communicative competence which is proposed by the Course of Study.

This paper will open by considering the aim of ELT in Japanese secondary schools from various viewpoints: Course of Study, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which is now regarded as an objective of ELT in Japan and perspectives of Japanese teachers of English and students. The second argument will concern issues of the recent curriculum innovation, Oral communication (OC). The research findings of teachers in real situations are to be discussed. The final consideration will be the value of ELT as a part of formal education, considering questions, such as to what extent we can be or should be focus on the practical aspect of language teaching.

### 2. Framework and Objective of ELT in Japan

#### 2-1: The Japanese Course of Study

In order to consider the aim of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Japan, the Course of Study (that is, the government-prescribed curriculum) can be an appropriate object of study. It prescribes the purpose of English education in Japan and it is revised every 10 years according to social changes. The current Course of Study for secondary schools states the following three purposes. These are to develop students' communicative competence in foreign language; to encourage students' positive attitude to communicate in a foreign language; to promote students' interest in languages and cultures, to foster international understanding (Monbusho, 1989).

The objectives seem to include two opposing views that are not always compatible in real teaching situation: the view of culturalism which insists on teaching foreign language to help students develop themselves, and that of pragmatism which insists on teaching a foreign language so that students can use it in actual situations. In comparison with the former Course of Study, the importance of communication is emphasised, whereas acquiring an understanding of the daily life and ways of thinking of foreign people, was deleted (Takakura et, al, 1998). This shows the current tendency towards a utilitarian emphasis.

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The most important thing to be clear here is what communicative competence in the Course of Study is. Canale and Swain(1980), widely quoted linguists, present four components of communicative competence; grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. Savignon(1983) develops this idea and gives lucid explanations on these. Referring to her explanations, this section will consider the meaning of communicative competence in the 1989 Course of Study.

The first consideration will be grammatical competence.

*Grammatical competence is mastery of the linguistic code, the ability to recognise the **lexical, morphological, syntactic, and phonological** features of a language and to manipulate these features to form words and sentences (Savignon 1983:37).*

In the Course of Study, each subject is provided with its objectives, contents and the ways of dealing with these. The contents include language activities and linguistic elements; *lexicon, syntax* and *phonology*. It is therefore certain that grammar is regarded as one of the essential element of the communicative competence in the Course of Study.

For sociolinguistic competence, it is necessary to have accurate judgement for the appropriate utterance. The schematic knowledge, in other words, the knowledge of socialising in the real life situation, such as topic, norm and the way of saying, is to be learned (Savignon, 1983). The appropriateness in relation to the cross-cultural communication is a valuable item that leads to international understanding, one of the main aims of the Course of Study.

In contrast with grammatical competence which interprets the sentence, discourse competence requires understanding structure and unfolding more than one paragraph. The Course of Study gives this competence as an important aspect in the points of instruction. In Savignon's explanation about the strategic competence, she states that,

*The strategies that one uses to compensate for imperfect knowledge of rules - or limiting factors in their application such as fatigue, distraction, and inattention-may be characterised as strategic competence... The strategies we use to sustain communication include paraphrase, circumlocution, repetition, hesitation, avoidance, and guessing, as well as shifts in register and style (Savignon 1983: 40-41).*

This competence leads to fostering students' positive attitude to communicate. This concept closely relates to the development of speaking competence which is the most controversial point of ELT in Japan.

So far this section has outlined the communicative competence in the Course of Study. As a whole this framework puts its emphasis on communication as a goal, and it covers all of the four important aspects of communicative competence.

## 2-2: CLT: a basis of curriculum innovation

As is the current fashion in the world, CLT seems to be regarded as a cure-all approach for the practical aspects of ELT in Japan. This approach is therefore used as a basis of curriculum innovation. This section will try to give an account of the idea of CLT.

CLT is an approach to foreign language teaching which originates in Wilkins's Notional Syllabuses (1976 in Richards and Rodgers, 1986) and was developed by the Council of Europe in the 1970s. CLT aims to (a) make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and (b) develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication (Richards and Rogers, 1986).

Defining the concept of CLT, Brown (1994 in Sato and Kleinsasser, 1999:495) points out the goals of CLT, that is, all of four skills of communicative competence (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Those are the lesson design that enables learners to use a target language with a pragmatic, authentic and functional approach; fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques; and students ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively. The feasibility and effectiveness of the communicative tasks and activities in classrooms vary depending on situations. For instance, it is obvious that situations in European countries where languages have some connections to each other are largely different from those of Japan where Japanese that has no relation to English is a single language.

Moreover, the important thing not to be ignored is that, originally, CLT developed in terms of the increasing comings and goings of peoples among European countries (Trim, 1973). This means that the target of this approach is the adult who immediately has to acquire a language to communicate. Therefore, to apply this idea to school education in Japan, it is necessary to consider the difference of social and cultural factors. Those are both related to the actual situation surrounding teachers and students. The consideration of their perspectives may reveal several constraints to this goal.

### **2-3: Teachers' perspectives**

According to Nakata (1990), there are enormous difficulties in implementing CLT in the educational situations of Japanese schools. He points out some reasons that include the lack of communicative competence of Japanese teachers of English, the large class size and non-English environment. It is obviously difficult to teach English communicatively to forty-five students in a class and to create an atmosphere of genuine communication in English for students who have no life need of communication in English. The class size issue urgently needs to be dealt with. As for the environment issue, increasing number of native English teachers may be able to contribute to improve the situation to some extent. However, teachers' lack of English proficiency seems to be regarded as the most fundamental problem to be solved (Henrichsen, 1989; Kitao & Kitao, 1995; LoCastro, 1996; Suzuki, 1999).

Ellis (1996) insists that teachers' ability plays the most significant role in what actually happens in the classroom, because the role of teacher is to be a model of the target language, representative and interpreter of his or her culture, learning facilitator and counsellor. In relation to the teacher's role as a model of language, Cook (1999) suggests that teachers, as successful L2 users, effectively encourage students to learn the target language and promote their motivation. It is reasonable for students to set up the target of learning not towards native teachers but towards non-native teachers of English. Moreover, as learning facilitators, teachers need to be able to read research papers in terms of catching up with development in their profession (Kitao and Kitao, 1995). Kitao and Kitao (1995) argues that even though effective methodology

has been introduced, most Japanese teachers of English can not apply that because of their lack of theoretical knowledge. So, there is a large gap between researchers and practitioners, in other words, linguists and language teachers. In fact, lessening this disparity is a problematic issue of language teaching in wider sense (Legutke and Thomas, 1991; Kitao and Kitao, 1995; Duff and Uchida, 1997; Sato and Kleinsasser, 1999).

Through some research which considers the complexity of teachers' beliefs, knowledge and practice concerning CLT, language classrooms can be found where communication as well as interaction and negotiation rarely happens, forms tends to be prior to meaning, accuracy issue is always concerned rather than fluency (Legutke and Thomas, 1991; Sato and Kleinsasser, 1999).

To teach English effectively complying with the purpose of the criteria, it is indispensable for teachers to have theoretical background as well as practical competence. This also leads to a further co-operative relationship between linguists and English teachers for tackling highly complicated issues in actual language teaching situations to change for the better. For the purpose of this betterment, institutional support has to be established. In reality, lack of in-service teacher training and institutional support meeting teachers' needs cause teachers to feel that teacher training programs are solely time-consuming and believe that their absence will be a disincentive to the students. Therefore, the more dedicated the teacher is, the less inclined they will be to join the program. There are a number of problems awaiting solution in teacher education and training.

#### 2-4: Students' perspectives

As many researchers point out, because of the university entrance examination in which competency in English is tested, many students have a high level of instrumental motivation in Japanese secondary schools (Mckay, 1992; LoCastro, 1996). This means English is a measure of having a key for a good life. Since the quality of a person's whole life is virtually decided by the selection for the best jobs in the best organisations, passing examinations for the best universities and best high schools has a compelling importance (White, 1988; Morishima, 1982). Students therefore study English. They tend to think that good teaching is to develop their question-solving skills in exams and minimise the value of practical oral skill courses. Their non-English speaking environment clearly contributes to their value judgement.

For teachers and parents also, the pressure of examination competition is the main focus of education. The purposely difficult examinations which consist of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and translation questions compel the approach of classroom instruction to be examination-oriented instruction, so-called 'exam English' (LoCastro, 1996). What kind of English is this? How different is this from English in the general sense?

By analysing the university entrance examination, Nakata (1990) points out that most questions are the 'discrete point test' within the framework of the 'sentence grammar'. He clearly describes this type of questions, such as 'filling in the blanks with the suitable words given; paraphrasing; identification of the grammatical functions of the infinitives; sentence-building by arranging given words; putting into Japanese a few English sentences which are part of a large paragraph; distinguishing whether there is anything grammatically wrong or not in each given sentence' (1990: 81). It is certain that this type of questions measures examinees' grammatical competence and lexical knowledge, for example, vocabulary of idiomatic expression.

Therefore, 'exam English' consists of the grammar translation approach and students stick to memorisation. These are often criticised and given as reasons why the students who are highly motivated at the first stage lose their interest and most of the learners finish the English course without acquiring adequate knowledge to communicate (Kitao and Kitao, 1995). In addition, Kubota(1999) points out that examination-oriented instruction, especially a great amount of memorisation, will negatively affect students' critical and analytic thinking skills.

However, as Widdowson (1990:87) claims, 'grammar simply formalises the most widely applicable concepts, the highest common factors of experience: it provides for communicative economy.' Since both vocabulary and grammar express meanings, they foster creativity and expression. Especially for students in a non-English environment, the grammar translation method can be effective to understand the form of the target language which is essential to produce accuracy and fluency.

Widdowson (1978) also distinguishes use and usage of language: use means communication behaviour, while usage simply shows the knowledge. It can be said that 'exam English' is usage of English, not English in use, in other words, it is not the real use of English. Learning English for the purposes of entrance examinations seems to distort its educational efficacy.

Interestingly, Christensen(1985 in McKay, 1992) differs from Kitao and Kitao(1995) who insist that most examinations do not require performance in English. Analysing contents of entrance examinations in which there are a great many items that demand global skill, Christensen casts a question on the widespread belief of teachers, that the grammar-translation approach is the best preparation for entrance examinations, and recommends a reading-oriented approach as the best. The teacher's belief in the methodology, which has allowed continued teacher centred instruction with students' passive learning style, might be wrong.

This is an ironical fact that, although passing examinations is the greatest source of motivation for students' English language study and examinations contain a variety of language use, these also cause a severe imbalance between language education and teaching. In other words, there seems to be a big gap between the goals of education and teaching. The educational goal is to let students acquire four kinds of competence of English as the Course of Study proposes. The teaching goal is to let students pass examinations. This gap creates a dilemma for teachers and students.

Can the classroom putting emphasis on communication be established in this environment? In order to answer this question, the most important thing seems to be to demonstrate how the classroom using CLT can obtain good results on entrance examinations. The learner's motivation for learning seems to be maintained better depending on how their classroom learning relates their objectives and supports them in accomplishing it successfully (Littlewood, 1981).

In recent years, increasing numbers of universities had adopted listening tests in their entrance examinations. CLT attempts to develop skills in global understanding extracting the gist of a piece of language that could help in those listening tests. In addition, in 1993, the reading comprehension tests in the entrance examinations of 93 in 97 state universities contained questions which again required skill in extracting the gist of the language that CLT classrooms can

deal with, such as summaries (Kimura, 1995). These recent changes in examination show the feasibility of the CLT classroom. Further research is needed on improving the system of entrance examination, because it is obvious that this system has a large effect on the perspectives of students as well as teachers.

## **2-5: Summary**

The change of the Course of Study seems to reflect the shifting of the objective of ELT in Japan from culturalism to pragmatism; to acquire communicative competence is regarded to be a clear goal. In the Japanese monolingual situation, however, it seems to be problematic to pursue this goal. There are a number of social, organisational and personal attitudes that need to be adjusted in terms of pursuing this goal. For instance, teachers cannot reconcile themselves with continuing Japanese traditional teacher centred instruction; teachers need students' active involvement in stead of their passive learning attitudes, because the interaction between teachers and students is a key factor of successful communicative classroom management to convert 'exam English' into 'real use of English'. This paper now moves to focus on what is actually happening in classrooms due to the curriculum innovation, Oral Communication.

## **3. Curriculum Innovation**

### **3-1: Oral Communication (OC)**

For undertaking the practical aspect of language teaching, since 1989, Oral Communication (OC) has been adopted as a regular subject in the curriculum of ELT in Japanese secondary school. This section will examine the idea of OC and see the real classroom situations discussing several issues in OC classrooms in relation to the level of materials, psychological and cultural factors. To have students' involvement in classrooms, in other words, to convert from teacher-centred into learner-centred, teacher need to be interested in students' genuine demands and their mental practice in learning.

OC is a subject that has its theoretical basis on CLT. However, it only focuses on developing listening and speaking in a foreign language. There are three levels in OC: A, B and C. The goal of OC-A is to communicate in daily life settings (school, home and society) and to foster a positive attitude to try to communicate. In activities, listening and speaking are to be balanced. The goal of OC-B is higher level activities than OC-A's and mainly focuses on listening. That of OC-C is a much more advanced level and is about organising ideas, expressing them in not only the daily social setting but also the public or formal setting. In reality, the gap between these three levels is too large and assessment is very difficult because there are no clear criteria or standards for measuring ability of students' language use.

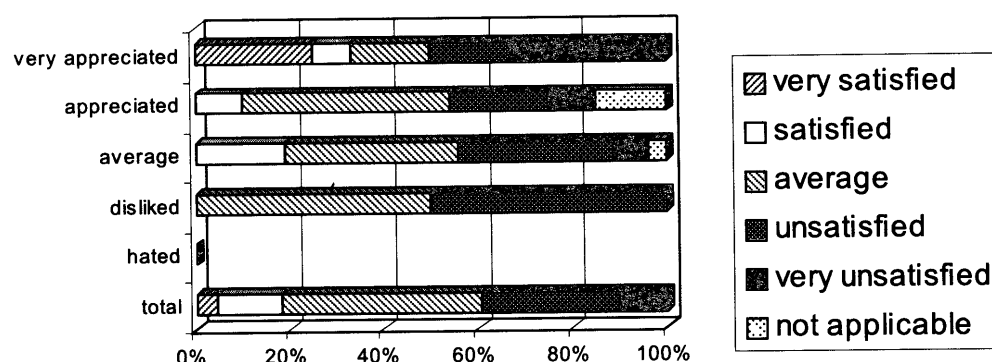
With the help of Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) and the teachers of Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET) who are both native foreign language teachers hired by national or state agencies, the implementation of OC has made it possible to introduce real English into classrooms. However, as Richards and Rodgers (1986) argue, the implementation of a communicative approach generates problems for teacher training, materials development and testing and evaluation, especially in the situation where students must sit for a grammar-based test such as entrance examination in Japan. This has been outlined in relation to perspectives in the section two. Now what has taken place in the actual OC classroom is to be focused on.

### **3-2: Research**

This paper reports on two sets of data collected from Japanese teachers of English. These

Table 1 Students' Satisfaction toward the OC Classrooms

(Kitahara, 1995)



consist of the teachers' views about using CLT in their own pedagogical contexts. Introducing the research carried out in 1994, one year after the first implementation of OC, Kitahara(1995) argues that OC does not meet the needs of students. With the help of students whom he taught English throughout their lower secondary school days, he obtained information by means of questionnaires in every beginning and end of terms and after their graduation, one year after they had studied OC in upper secondary schools. His questionnaire concerns students' preference for learning English and then the reasons and the period in which their preference changed.

The main issue to be focused on here is the finding of the research after their graduation. Table 1 illustrates an interrelation between students' feeling for English and their satisfaction with OC. According to table 1, students who like English very much show their dissatisfaction for OC. This percentage is up to be 50% including unsatisfied (17%) and very unsatisfied (33%). It is strongly possible that the OC classroom doesn't go along with what students in higher level want. Note that the level of the ability and attitude tend to be mutually related. OC-A, which starts with greeting and focuses on conversation in usual or daily situation, tends to be too easy for students in upper secondary level. The disparity in level between what they learn in the OC classroom and what they learn in other English classrooms seems to be a big issue to be investigated in the field of material development.

The next piece of research will focus on the psychological aspect which could cause the students' dissatisfaction towards the communicative activities. The study of learning style may provide important information to this aspect, because it indicates how learners perceive, interact with and respond to their learning environment (Hyland, 1993; Sato and Kleinsasser, 1999). On the basis of two kinds of research; Reid's (1989 in Kimura,1995) research about learning style of Japanese students at American universities and Hyland's (1993) research about that at Japanese universities, Kimura (1995), who was a upper secondary school teacher of English, made an assumption that a characteristic of Japanese students' learning style is not to be fond of learning using visual aids and group activities, and verified this assumption by a questionnaire survey to 184 teachers and 3,500 freshmen who had experienced the OC classroom. The questionnaire was to evaluate twenty items of communicative and non-communicative activities, all of which were divided by 6 areas of perception (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, individual and group) from three different angles of feelings (enjoyment, effectiveness and accomplishment) according to the five grades system. Hyland (1993) explains each perceptual modality in learning

as follows; visual is associated with reading; auditory relates to listening and discussing; kinesthetic is in relation to experiential and physical involvement; tactile is connected to creative 'hands-on' activities which include writing and experimentation.

Table 2 shows the correlation coefficient between enjoyment and effectiveness of communicative activities. Considering the order of preferences, it appears that students' feelings are not always similar to teachers'. In the activity of filling in the blanks with the suitable word according to the video watching, both reactions are similar. Moreover, on the lack of favour of game activity, their feelings are almost the same. However, as for the listening activity through the lecture of ALTs, the feelings of students and teachers are completely different; students rate this 10th (the worst) whereas teachers rate it 2nd. This may reflect students' learning style.

Table 3 shows average figures of teaching style and learning style in all activities. In comparison with the results of the former two pieces of research, the average figures of teaching style in this research show similar results, while those of learning style are rather low as a whole. The characteristics of students' learning style are high in tactile, visual and individual learning, but very low in auditory and kinesthetic and group learning. It can be said that, as far as this research is concerned, students are not fond of the learning style which involves listening to explanations and group activity, such as pair work and role play. But, it is safer not to generalize so far. Hyland (1994) points out that as experience of each activities increase, the preference of learning style can be changeable. Teachers therefore need to try to employ different styles of approach depending on students' individual differences gradually and with time.

Table 2 The Correlation Coefficient between Enjoyment and Effectiveness

Items	Teachers	Students
Debate	.471	.543(1 <sup>st</sup> )
Lecture of ALT	.470	.319(10 <sup>th</sup> )
Song lyrics	.450	.368(7 <sup>th</sup> )
Process writing	.446	.419(4 <sup>th</sup> )
Video	.379	.442(3 <sup>rd</sup> )
Grammar and role play	.356	.476(2 <sup>nd</sup> )
Speech	.259	.380(6 <sup>th</sup> )
Authentic material	.214	.413(5 <sup>th</sup> )
Information gap	.152	.359(8 <sup>th</sup> )
Game	.128	.338(9 <sup>th</sup> )

\* based on Kimura(1995)

Table 3. Teaching Style and Learning style

(Kimura,1995)

	Visual	Auditory	Kinesthetic	Tactile	Individual	Group
Reid(1987)	12.52	12.67	13.29	13.32	12.05	10.35
Hyland(1993)	10.93	12.33	12.00	12.18	11.32	10.06
Teachers' result	12.29	12.99	12.04	13.05	12.65	11.89
Students' result	10.42	9.84	8.68	11.04	10.67	8.64



### 3-3: Summary

So far this section has illustrated situations caused by the innovation of ELT in Japan. Since this is a rather new project, little is known about how to evaluate it. Several issues in the OC classroom however have been seen, such as the gap between levels and materials, the difference of feeling between teachers' and students' and students' learning styles. To realise a successful classroom, it is very likely that we need further investigation about what is happening in the classroom and how communicative the classroom can be. Continuous efforts to study and arrange effective ways of teaching OC considering students' demand seem to be necessary for teachers to pursue successfully the goal of ELT in Japan.

### 4. Language Teaching in School Context

Under the Course of Study, ELT in Japan is seeking for the way towards pragmatism. However, teachers need to bear in mind that the character of language teaching in secondary schools is different from that of language schools. This section will consider the value of language teaching as education in school context.

Foreign language teaching and learning within a school setting should satisfy educational criteria as well as offering language as a code and as a means of communication (Grauberg, 1997). As Cook (1999) argues, language teaching has two aspects to balance. These are the educational gains which affect student's mind, attitude and personality, and the social and communicative gains of practical language use.

He maintains that the aim of foreign language teaching is divided between the internal goals and the external goals. The internal goal is in connection with the life of students within the classroom, and the external goal is in connection with the language use of students outside the classroom. The internal goal develops the student's mind in several respects other than mere knowledge of language, such as 'to promote an interest in language and culture' in Course of Study of Japan (Monbusho, 1989) and 'to develop cultural awareness' in the National Curriculum of the United Kingdom (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1999). This kind of mental benefit as a function of L2 learning is crucial in many educational systems (Cook, 1999).

The character of ELT in Japanese secondary schools, therefore, can be different from that of native teacher-based language teaching in private language schools. The native speaker model is not always needed in classroom setting because students get many things out of learning the language other than speaking like natives (Cook, 1999). Japanese secondary school teachers of English seem to have very demanding jobs.

In this paradigm shift of Japanese EFL in school that changes from culturalism to pragmatism, teachers should be careful not to fall into the misunderstanding that 'practical' means merely speaking and listening. It seems to be leading to inhibiting a part of students' learning opportunities. Due to the radically increasing changes in society, there is a variety of special purpose English, for example IT (Information Technology) English, e-mail English, business English and academic English. To foster the well balanced basis of a student's ability in foreign language is most important so that s/he can develop competence differently depending on their needs later. There is, therefore, necessity for further discussion on the issue of what the value of foreign language teaching is in school.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has illustrated that, in reality, the change of the goal in English education requires very complicated arrangements, because the objectives of society, teachers and students are not always compatible with each other. Moreover, classroom management is a highly context-specific matter. The culture of the society, institution and people create various gaps between ideal and reality, theory and practice and so on. These gaps may have the effect of making it difficult to modify long-time practices in classrooms.

There seems not to be a correct or an easy way of adjusting these gaps to realise effective classrooms in order to pursue the goal, successful ELT in Japan. Further research in various areas is needed to seek for a more suitable approach to establish successful classrooms by using CLT in the Japanese specific ELT context. It is very important to improve the situation of testing in connection to entrance examinations, teacher training, material development and small class size. However, these arrangements should be carried out with careful and continuous adjustments that result of observing what is happening in the real classrooms as well as careful considerations of the educational value.

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